

Art at the crossroads: Francisco Oller and Caribbean art

Review of:

Edward J. Sullivan *From San Juan to Paris and Back: Francisco Oller and Caribbean Art in the Era of Impressionism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014, 208 pp., 81 colour + 18 b/w ills, \$60.00 hdbk, ISBN: 978-0-300-20320-2

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Francisco Oller (1833-1917) was a Puerto Rican visual artist whose career straddled a tumultuous period in the island's history, during which it transitioned from a Spanish colonial outpost to a protectorate of its increasingly powerful neighbour, the United States. Far from being a provincial figure, he had several extended residences in Europe, studying first in Spain and then living and working in Paris. He counted European avant-garde artists from Gustave Courbet to Paul Cézanne among his acquaintances, and absorbed the lessons of their styles and content. Yet whether he was painting landscape, portraiture, history painting or still life, he was expressing some quintessential aspect of Puerto Rican culture. Until now the literature on this artist has been limited, given that major scholarly attention was directed toward him over thirty years ago: the monumental 1983 exhibition *Francisco Oller: Un realista del Impresionismo* for the Museo de Arte de Ponce, and Osiris Mercado Delgado monograph *Francisco Oller y Cestero (1833-1917): Pintor de Puerto Rico*.¹ These projects were groundbreaking efforts, and laid the foundation for all future research. But as Delgado Mercado's subtitle indicates, he was more concerned with positioning Oller as the leader of a national school of Puerto Rican art. With the publication of Edward J. Sullivan's *From San Juan to Paris and Back: Francisco Oller and Caribbean Art in the Era of Impressionism*, the artist can now be recognized as a key figure in the broader history of the nineteenth century. This volume provides critical insights into his career, which in turn provides a lens through which to follow the forging of nineteenth century Caribbean art. Situating him simultaneously in Caribbean and trans-Atlantic contexts, the author deftly presents new interpretations of even the most familiar of his artistic production. This book, with its depth of documentation and bounty of colour illustrations, presents Oller as an artist as complex and creative as the Caribbean.

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¹ Osiris Delgado Mercado, *Francisco Oller y Cestero (1833-1917): Pintor de Puerto Rico*, San Juan: Centro de Estudios Superiores de Puerto Rico y Caribe, 1983.

University. A pre-eminent scholar of Latin American, he has long been an important voice in the field. Over time he has directed his attention to artists from most of the countries in the Americas, from Mexico to Brazil but has turned his attention increasingly toward the Caribbean.

Successive chapters of *From San Juan to Paris and Back* offer close readings of key works, which in turn open vistas onto critical dimensions of Caribbean visual culture. Chapter 1 'embeds Oller within a complex history of developments of art and society in the Caribbean basi'. (9) It situates the artist first in Puerto Rico's nascent art tradition, which Oller self-consciously assessed and mined. In particular he struggled to come to terms with its most famous representative José Campeche, who cast a long shadow with his religious paintings and official portraits of the island's Spanish rulers. Chapter 2 follows him on his residences in Spain and France as his style developed with each new influence and opportunity. Next the author presents an in-depth examination of *The School of Master Rafael Cordero* (discussed below). Chapter 4 then scrutinizes 'the dilemma of "official" painting' via his history painting *Battle of Treviño*. Sullivan here positions Oller's art between Spanish figures such as Mariano Fortuny y Marsal on the one hand and French artists of his day including Courbet, Camille Pissarro and Cézanne on the other, in order to pinpoint how the Puerto Rican artist assimilated their various lessons to create his personal style. Chapter 5 moves to an innovative discussion of his still life painting (discussed below). In the final chapter (written in conjunction with Max Antonio Mischler) Oller's portrait of William McKinley – rediscovered in 2010 after being lost for over one hundred years – provides the opportunity to critique the conflicted circumstances in which the Puerto Rican artist worked as his homeland came under the control of the United States. Here Oller emerges especially as a 'politically aware and strategically ambitious artist'. (159)

Oller grew up in a privileged background, the child of a white, upper middle class family of intellectuals and medical professionals. On the paternal side, his family had come from Spain one generation before his birth. Yet his pictures delineate a more diverse reality. Oller has been called the quintessential Puerto Rican artist, initiator of the modern tradition in Puerto Rico, and an essential bridge between the art of Europe and the Americas. To come to terms with his subject, Sullivan adopts a multi-pronged methodology in an attempt to move beyond the usual tools of art history in the Americas. Historical, social, as well as artistic perspectives are adopted in order to do justice to the totality of Oller's achievement and the numerous central questions it raises. Key themes recur throughout the book: his abolitionist concerns, dedication to art pedagogy and immersion in the art of the past. Above all we are constantly struck by the fluidity of a career that echoes the fluidity of the Caribbean, as he traversed multiple boundaries of class, nation, and race and amalgamated them into a remarkable and representative artistic production.

Moving beyond national boundaries and agendas, Sullivan interprets Oller as paradigm of the Caribbean, where artists and intellectuals lived peripatetic lives:

a phenomenon that persists until the present day in the form of the Caribbean diaspora. Given that he conceived of this publication as an inquiry into the multiplicity of Caribbean visual cultures in the second half of the nineteenth century, we must address briefly how he articulated that geographical space. It was an area that contained not only European-based Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanophone societies, but also those speaking a variety of African and Amerindian tongues: all of whom contributed their own ideas and cultural artefacts. Through the author's words, we begin to conceptualize the environment in which Oller painted his canvases: a prismatic mix of indigenous populations and their interactions with mainland Meso- and South America; arriving of slaves from Africa and – in the nineteenth century – labourers from India; then there were the lingering effects of colonialism (French, English, Spanish, and Dutch). An extended archipelago that was multi-lingual, trans-national, and multi-ethnic, the Caribbean was disjointed and confusing: a truly global locale. Perusing these pages we come to understand Oller's art as that product of this crossroads of cultural creativity.

Any discussion of Caribbean art and artists must necessarily take into account its prominent cultural presence: the heritage of West African slavery from the early 1500s onward. Most delineators of the Caribbean landscape contemporary with or prior to Oller either omit altogether the presence of slaves or follow prescribed formula. Among the earliest European artists to depict the Anglophone Caribbean was Italian painter Agostino Brunias, whose paintings reinforce the message of place where commerce can be peacefully conducted. Pictures such as *Free Women of Color with their Children and Servants in the Landscape* (c. 1764-96, Brooklyn Museum) convey a pleasant outdoor promenade in the manner of Thomas Gainsborough. As Kay Dian Kriz elucidates, however, the picture precipitated controversy in Britain for its presentation of a mixed race female gathering, which certain sectors of society found immoral, even if it was a rococo fantasy.² Tim Barringer and others have discussed the Jamaican-born British artist Isaac Mendes Belisario, best remembered for his book of taxonomies of race and class on the island. His 'sketches of characters' follows a long tradition initiated in Italy and Great Britain and carried to the New World most famously in the form of Mexican *casta* painting.³ At best these pictures offer veiled commentary on slavery. Oller, by contrast, was forthright in his stand against chattel slavery. He began to create his abolitionist manifestoes in paint in the late 1860s, including the portrayal of a slave being flogged by a plantation overseer (now lost), and he continued to create images sympathetic to enslaved peoples of African descent for the remainder of his career.

Oller's singular work in still life painting is taken up in Chapter 5. This genre is often ranked low in the artistic hierarchy, to the extent that Norman Bryson titles

² Kay Dian Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700-1840*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008: 58-59.

³ Tim Barringer, Gillian Forrester, and Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica: Isaac Mendes Belisario and His Worlds*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

his study on the subject *Looking at the Overlooked*.⁴ But building on his earlier book *The Language of Objects in the Art of the Americas* Sullivan teases out the nuances of form and meaning in Oller's depictions of tropical fruits and vegetables.⁵ Acknowledging that they are part of a continuum of European art, he also makes an argument for their role in establishing a visual genealogy of nationhood. Bananas and the related plantains, just to take one example, form the backbone of the Caribbean diet, as well a prime trading commodity from Spain's colonization of Puerto Rico to well into the twentieth century. In *Still Life with Plantains* (c. 1893; Private Collection) Oller creates a work of arresting formal beauty that also speaks to the reality of the Caribbean. In this he parallels twentieth century author Gabriel García Márquez who in his novels set in Colombia also adopts this natural product and the foreign banana company who capitalized on it (a thinly disguised United Fruit Company) as potent symbols of Latin America and a cause of its underdevelopment.⁶ Sullivan's analysis elucidates the importance of still life in Oller's art, on par with his landscapes, portraits and history paintings as 'intimations of nationhood'. (154)

What strikes me as one of Sullivan's most deeply felt discussions is contained in Chapter 3, which focuses on Oller's painting *The School of Master Rafael Cordero* (1890-92; Colección del Ateneo Puertorriceno, San Juan) as a springboard to a broader exposition of pedagogy in the Caribbean. Cordero was the legendary founder of the first school for enslaved children in San Juan in 1810. The son of slaves, he eventually accepted children from across all social ranks, some of whom played a leading role in Puerto Rico's abolitionist movement. His support of open education for all classes was a subject close to the heart of the artist, steeped in the philosophy of French anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who advocated for the power of education to promote a more positive future for his nation, especially in time of great political upheaval. Cordero's school, located in the colonial sector of San Juan, a few blocks from Oller's residence, inspired one of the artist's most poignant figural compositions. It depicts the Master surrounded by a handful of students in varying states of attention, from those engrossed in the lesson to others acting out typical childhood pranks, all painted with great affection.

While the book makes no pretence of comprehensive coverage from birth to death, still it might have been helpful to have a chronology to follow the travels and artistic production of this complicated career. Similarly, since place is important to the artist and his work, a map displaying the arena of his activity might also have assisted some readers less versed in the geography of the region. Still, these are minor quibbles. This book sets a new standard for monographic studies. It marks

⁴ Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, London: Reaktion, 1990.

⁵ Edward J. Sullivan, *The Language of Objects in the Art of the Americas*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007.

⁶ Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, trans. Gregory Rabassa, New York: Harper & Row, 1970.

both a labour of love in which he has been engaged, in one way or another, since graduate school as well as a landmark achievement in a long succession of important publications by Edward J. Sullivan.

Not to be overlooked is Oller's impact on subsequent Puerto Rican artists, to which Sullivan devotes an epilogue. Several of his works have become national icons, and as such continue to speak simultaneously to the island's identity and its future. Rafael Ferrer's *Oller in the Hacienda Aurora* (1984, Collection of Peter Pence, Chicago) or Antonio Martorell's *Carbon Copies: Homage to 'The Wake'* (2000, Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico) were created in dialogue not only with Oller's pictorial imagery, but also with his ability to probe the history of the Caribbean for its most provocative institutions and lay bare prevailing attitudes toward them.

This book accompanies exhibition that will be on view at the Blanton Museum of Art (June-September 2015), The Brooklyn Museum (October 2015-January 2016), and Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, San Juan (January-April 2016). Its publication coincides with the appearance of two other books and related exhibitions on nineteenth century art of the Americas: *Traveller Artists: Landscapes of the Americas from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection* and *Picturing the Americas: Landscape Painting from Tierra del Fuego to the Arctic*.⁷ Together they signal a new era in the study of this field, one in which Edward Sullivan has been a leading figure.

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⁷ Katherine Manthorne (ed.), *Traveller Artists: Landscapes of the Americas from the Patricia Phelps de Cisneros Collection*, Marquand, 2015 and P.J. Brownlee (ed.), *Picturing the Americas: Landscape Painting from Tierra del Fuego to the Arctic*, Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario and Terra Foundation, 2015.